

# The War and our Responsibility,

SERMON PREACHED AT THE  
BERKELEY STREET SYNAGOGUE,

*On Saturday, October 17th, 1914,*

**By the REV. MORRIS JOSEPH.**

Genesis iv. 9-10: "And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not; am I my brother's keeper? And He said, What has thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground."

ACCORDING to a Rabbinic legend when Cain had done his murderous deed the whole brute creation assembled before God to demand the punishment of the malefactor. His foul crime moved even the fiercest creatures—the ravening beasts and the birds of prey—with anger and detestation. The legend expresses the horror with which deeds of bloodshed, especially those perpetrated by men upon their brothers, upon their kith and kin, upon those entitled to their mercy and protection, have inspired the human mind from time immemorial. And this righteous sentiment has gained in scope and intensity with the progress of the ages. Human life has acquired an extended value, drawn to itself a greater reverence. Murder, we have long since come to see, may be committed with more delicate instruments than the bludgeon or the knife. The "Thou shalt not kill" of the Sixth Commandment is violated by every process, even though it consist in merely harsh acts or words, that wears away the vitality of a human being by sapping his happiness, his courage, his spirit. The brother, whose keeper we are, for whose life we are responsible, is our fellow-man, whoever and wherever he may be, seeing that we are all children of one Divine Father, members of one world-wide family. The brotherhood of man, the solidarity of the human race—this grand idea set forth by implication in the text and explicitly in the subsequent declaration, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God made He man," has taken faster hold upon the human

mind the further the world has moved along the path of progress. This seems like a truism; or it would have seemed so a few short weeks ago. But to-day we are in the presence of events which not only prove it to be no truism, but set us doubting whether it is even a truth. At this moment nations claiming to represent the high-water mark of civilization are trying to outdo each other in acts of bloodshed. The conception of human brotherhood which we deemed so safe and well-established has been uprooted and swept away in the savage welter of war. Men, created in the image of God, have lost that sacred impress and been transformed into demons. Nor is this the whole of the paradox. Part of the tragedy of War lies in the demoralization, not only of the combatants, but of the spectators. We read with equanimity of the slaughter of thousands of our fellow-creatures, especially if they are enemies, heedless of their agony, forgetful, too, of the fact that every life thus sacrificed means at least one other darkened and ruined. There are those who protest against the inclusion in a modern service of a War-cry like the Song of Moses, with its appeal to primitive passions, its glorification of the All father as

### **A God of War,**

its shout of triumph over the fallen foe. But have they any right to protest—they whose hearts are chaunting a like pæan almost every day in these times? "I never dreamt," said an aged friend to me the other day, "I never dreamt that my last years would be darkened by this world-shaking war, and is it not dreadful to think that we rejoice at news that tells of widespread ruin and death?" You will say that it is human nature so to rejoice. Yes, I reply, unregenerate human nature. Surely this blunting of the humanitarian instincts, which war inevitably produces, must be unnatural. God could never have meant us to acquiesce in these horrors. He could not have intended, as His final aim, that the world should continuously fall back from time to time to the inferior moral level which that acquiescence betokens. Judaism has its clear teaching on this point. When, says the old Talmudic legend, the Egyptians were drowning in the Red Sea the angels would have broken out into a song of praise. But God rebuked them. "What," He said, "My creatures, the work of My hands, are perishing, and you would exult!" And yet the Israelites, as we know, did exult. Is it not clearly the opinion of the Rabbins that the time will come when men will put from them their old recurrent savagery, and keep for ever the foothold of broad and tender humanity hard won by ages of moral struggle? I have suggested this train of thought, not to abate your ardour for the present conflict, or your conviction of the righteousness of our participation in it, but in order to emphasize the inherent badness and enormity of War regarded as a principle. In all the vicissitudes of this titanic struggle, in its reverses and its triumphs alike, we have to remember that it is essentially an evil, though a necessary one. The conflict is not of our making. It has been forced upon us, on the one

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hand by the duty of resisting a policy which would deify brute force and destroy human freedom, and on the other by regard for the sanctity of our plighted word. Never have we gone to war with a clearer conscience. But the fact remains that we *are* at war, and that we stand committed to the slaughter of our fellow-men, whose keepers we are. It means the swift and sudden reversal of the tide of progress, and the hurling back of the world into primeval barbarism. The reaction, it is true, is only for a time. The world will regain the moral ground it has lost. But it has lost it; it has been capable of losing it—*there* is the sinister, the disconcerting fact. With whom lies the main responsibility for this disaster, this rebuff to our idealism? We believe that we know. The proclamation of might as right, the insensate claim to usurp the function of Divine Providence and determine the destinies of the world, the arrogant intention to impose one nation's will, one conception of civilization, upon the whole of mankind, the tearing up of the code of international ethics as though it were a mere scrap of paper—this, we affirm, is responsible. Therefore, as I have said, we are fighting with an easy conscience. But that

### **Ease of Conscience,**

will suffice us, at best, only as long as the conflict lasts. All mankind will have to pay the price for the crime of this war—the guiltless as well as the guilty, the victors as well as the vanquished—so closely interwoven are the strands of the world's fate. Let us see to it that we pay the price not only as a victorious, but as a guiltless nation. The voice of our brothers' blood shed in this war will cry unto God from the ground. Against whom will it cry? Let us be able to say "not against us." "Is this not certain?" you will protest; "we have not made this quarrel; at the bar of Heaven we stand absolved." Yes, I reply, for the time being. But what of the years to come, when other wars spring out of this war, a monster begetting progeny after its kind? Suppose those wars arise without hindrance from us. Suppose we sow the seed of them by a craven disinclination to proclaim the duty, the glory, of promoting peace among men. No; now, when war grips us with its horrors, it is for us to range ourselves definitely on the side of peace, on the side of all the great souls among mankind, from the ancient Hebrew prophets onward, who have saved the world from going down hopelessly into the pit, and to resolve that the human race shall be permanently

### **Purged from Blood-guiltiness,**

and the awful voice that crieth against it from the ground shall cease its lament and its denunciation for ever. There is need for such a resolve. Later on it may be too late; defeat may beget the desire for revenge, victory inflame us with a love of so-called glory. When an English professor, lecturing at an English college, can gravely talk of the *beauty*

of war, and bid us learn from the enemy to make physical force our God, we need to be on our guard. The one justification for our share in this struggle is the belief that it will put an end to such teachings and demonstrate not the beauty of war, but its ugliness, its brutality, its wickedness. This, we must vow, shall be the last war. It may not be; but the vow, if we are faithful to it, will acquit us of all share in the responsibility for this conflict at the judgment-seat of God. We shall have done something, as a recent writer has well phrased it, "for the soul of England, so that when peace comes again it will be a treasure unimpaired." Nay, let all good men among all the nations join in the vow, and the end of War will be in sight. A new humanity will arise, with the mark of Cain effaced at last from its brow—a new humanity like unto the ideal Servant of the Lord whom the Prophet portrays for us, whose weapons are gentle peace and all-conquering love:—"He shall not cry, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed shall he not break, and the dimly burning wick shall he not quench; he shall bring forth justice in truth." It is a gracious vision. As men and Israelites we are doubly pledged to speed its realization.

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## The Jewish Peace Society

exists to promote the following objects :

- (i) To give effect to the teaching of Judaism by emphasizing the two-fold duty of combating the war-spirit, and of working actively for peace as part of the divine ideal of human society.
- (ii) To promote the growth of international friendship.
- (iii) To work for the adoption of arbitration and other peaceful means of settling international disputes.

The Society shall endeavour to carry out these objects by the issue of suitable literature, the holding of meetings and all other appropriate methods.

Particulars may be had from the Hon. Secretary, Jewish Peace Society, c/o the National Peace Council, 167, St. Stephen's House, Westminster, S.W.